

Thais Said to Erect Base Complex in Laos

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VIENTIANE, July 20—Elements of a Thai army regiment have reportedly moved across the frontier and established permanent bases in western Laos.

The bases were set up in a large area of Sayaboury Province, which borders Thailand, according to reports reaching here from Xieng Lom, 160 miles northwest of Vientiane.

The reports say Thai units entered Laos from Nan Province of Thailand during an antiguerrilla sweep in recent weeks and constructed satellite camps to the complex of CIA-maintained bases extending eastward from Xieng Lom to a 40-mile shallow arc to Hong Sa.

U.S. sources say the move is being coordinated by the Central Intelligence Agency, probably for area security.

Other U.S. sources reporting from Sayaboury Province say the Thai units are showing indications of permanently occupying a strip of Laos nearly 100 miles deep and 20 miles wide. They are also said to be turning southward toward Sayaboury City, the province capital, establishing outposts.

A recently improved all-weather highway from Nan City in Thailand to the Lao border, where it becomes an improved trail, is said to be the supply link with the Thai units.

Western military sources last week confirmed that there have been border incursions by Thais in recent weeks, but ascribed them to the ill-defined demarcations.

A security curtain is maintained over northern Sayaboury Province. Air transport, which is necessary for entry, is routinely denied to those without security clearance, including newsmen.

Nan and Udon provinces of Thailand, which border Sayaboury, are also off limits to journalists by orders from Bangkok.

Informed sources in Vientiane have confirmed that an operation had taken place in the Xieng Lom area in recent days but denied knowledge of any Thai participation in Laos. They said, however, that a concurrent and "possibly coordinated" sweep had occurred on the Thai side of the border.

U.S. mission sources said the clearing operation had been completed about 10 days ago. Until Monday, however, knowledge of such an operation was denied by all U.S. embassy offices normally releasing such information.

The Xieng Lom-Mueng Ngeum-Hong Sa complex, with its satellite camps, are reportedly reported to have outstripped the Meo base at Long Cheng near the Plain of Jars in importance to the U.S. war effort in Laos. They are said to be less important, however, than a base near Ban Houei Sai, 210 miles northwest of Vientiane and 50 miles northwest of Xieng Lom.

A unit of Thais training native tribesmen in Laos is regularly reported to be stationed in Xieng Lom and operating along the complex of positions.

A subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee has prepared a report that puts the number of Thai troops in Laos at 4,800.

In an action possibly related to the Thai incursion from the west, pro-government irregulars have reportedly launched an offensive thrust westward from Luang Prabang across the Mekong. There is no official confirmation of the thrust.

Other reports tending to confirm Thai operations in Sayaboury Province were printed in the Bangkok Post last week and attributed to

"informed government sources."

The Post said that Thai intelligence had located the headquarters of a Pathet Lao battalion less than 5 miles from the Thai border, with another battalion moving from Sayaboury Province to join it. The Pathet Lao, according to the sources, had sent men to pick up food from Thai territory.

An alert has been ordered in Uttaradit Province, according to the Post, and "the 2d Cavalry Regiment has been assigned to double the number patrolling the border area as a precaution against possible invasion by the Pathet Lao."

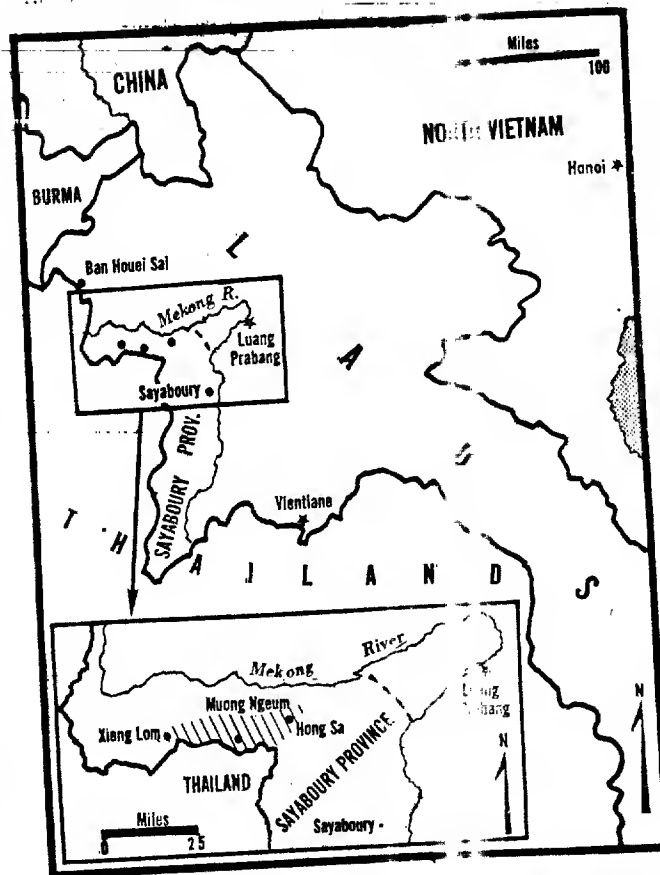
"Meanwhile," the Post reported, "an intelligence mission has been sent to collect more reports on Pathet Lao movements, the source said." U.S. analysts in Vientiane suggest the Post story may be a "planted cover" for operations 100 miles north of those reported and say they have received no reports on Pathet Lao presence in northern Sayaboury Province for months.

Western military sources only last week said they had no report of enemy movements in northern Sayaboury and no knowledge of anything more than isolated, ineffective pockets of Pathet Lao.

It is not worthy, however, that northern Sayaboury lies just across the Mekong from where primary analysts believe Chinese engineers will eventually stop building their road through northwestern Laos.

U.S. intelligence sources say construction was halted 20 miles short of the Mekong a year ago but it continues to produce official comments of alarm in Thai capital.

It is noteworthy that Sayaboury Province was annexed by Thailand during World War II, then returned to Laos and the French as part of the war settlement. The Bangkok government is generally believed to still covet the strip of Laos west of the Mekong.



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shaded area indicates area of reported Thai camps.